

The History of Woodburn, Oregon: 1851 - 1900

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For a term paper in partial requirements for Oregon History (History 377)
Fall Term, 1940

Manuscript Donated to the Museum by:

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The present town of Woodburn, Marion County, Oregon is located on what was formerly the donation land claim of George Leisure, Jean B. Ducharme, an early French-Canadian settler, and Eli Cooley and Bradford S. Bonney. The two latter owning at one time, the land upon which Woodburn is now situated. Cooley was a pioneer of 1845, who aided in the organization of the Oregon Pioneer Association at Butteville, Oregon, October 18, 1873. Bradford Bonney, who settled on his claim in 1849, had come with his father from the east, who had taken up a claim on French Prairie in 1846.

No account of the history of Woodburn would be complete without at least a brief summary of the little community of Belpassi. At present Belpassi consists of only a school and a cemetery and is situated on the Pacific Highway about two and one-half miles from Woodburn. When Woodburn was first platted, Belpassi was enjoying the prestige of having one or more stores, a school, a Cumberland Presbyterian Church, and being the social center of East French Prairie over to Elliot's Prairie and Monitor. When Belpassi's first pastor, the Reverend Neill Johnson, arrived in 1851, the community was nameless. It is said that being greatly influenced by the story of a town in Italy as told in a theological book, Rev. Johnson decided that the same name would be used for his new home. When his church was moved to Woodburn, Rev. Johnson moved too and became the first pastor there.

In 1862, Jean Ducharme was forced to sell his land claim of 214 acres at a foreclosure sale. Jesse Holland Settlemier, son of George Settlemier, who owned a claim at Mount Angel, bought it for a relatively small sum of money. The next year Settlemier moved to his land, built a comfortable house and established the Woodburn Nursery Company, which is still being operated. When Settlemier moved to this location, the site of the future city was unfenced and wild brush country. The title to Settlemier's purchase from Ducharme was too long in dispute that it was doubtful if Woodburn would be a reality or merely a dream.

What seemed an untoward circumstance, however, turned out to be a benefit. Mr. Settlemier had borrowed some money of William Reed of Portland during the long course of litigation over the title to the land on which he had given a mortgage for security. Reed was building a narrow gauge railroad through the valley and would have naturally chosen the route through the old town of Gervais, which lay in the direct line of survey, but for the mortgage he held in Settlemier's place which he thought would eventually become his own land and which would be enhanced in value by the building of his own road through the tract. The suit however was decided in the Supreme Court of the United States, and Mr. Settlemier, by dint of perseverance and strict economy, succeeded in clearing off the mortgage and the town was given a new start.

Ben Holladay of the old Oregon and California Railroad purchased a centrally-located piece of land and as the grade of the railroad ran west of the present town and also west of Mr. Holladay's holdings, he had it changed to its present location.

In 1871, the railroad was finally established and soon after Mr. Settlemier platted four blocks of a town west of the main line. He also subsidized the railroad company to make there a flag station and he and Ben Brown, another pioneer, gave fifty acres for the purpose. Three fourths of the lots of the newly platted town were at first given away by Settlemier in consideration of securing people to come and build. Soon afterwards, P.E. and A. Mathiot put up the first warehouse and store.

The little town was first named Halsey, after a railroad official. But after it had been discovered that there was already a town of that name in the state, the name was changed to Woodburn. It is said that E.P. Rogers, the Assistant General Passenger Agent of the Southern Pacific was present there during a large conflagration of slashings and as he saw the burn of the wood, had a happy thought of the young city, Woodburn.

Situated as Woodburn was, at the junction of the Springfield Natron Branch of the Oregon and California Railroad and the Mainline, (Now the Woodburn Springfield Branch of Southern Pacific Railroad and the Mainline), sixteen miles north of Salem the capital city and thirty-seven miles north of Portland, it became, very early, exceedingly important as a shipping point for grain and lumber and a source of social contact and farm supplies.

By 1878, Woodburn had a population of one hundred forty-five. Sixty-five children were attending school and there were ninety-eight legal votes. The little village boasted a Union Church, a blacksmith shop, a Good Templar's Lodge, and a grain storage building and merchandise store. The latter owned by Mr. P. Mathoit. Nearby, Jesse Holland Settlemier operated his several nurseries. The enclosed cut portrays Woodburn in 1878 after being platted by Mr. Settlemier (L.A. McArthur) Oregon Geographic names 395.

The first regular schoolhouse was erected in Woodburn in 1885. It was of the one room variety and rapidly became inadequate in handling the increasing number of children.

From 1880 on Woodburn began its greatest period of growth. In 1888 the Woodburn Independent, a weekly newspaper, was published for the first time, with L.H. McMahan as founder and editor. With him on the mechanical side, was Mr. A.S. Auterson, a young printer from the middle west. Mr. McMahan is now and has been for many years the circuit judge of Marion County. Mr. A.S. Auterson is now a partner in the Auterson Bennet Company Printers Portland.

Politics were really hot during the McMahan administration of the Independent. The young editor, who was a real westerner being a native of Baker County, Oregon, was a fighting editor with a crusading reform paper. He attached the close cooperation between politics and the liquor business and made his paper independent in fact as well as in name.

It is said that the first year twenty-five men were after him to whip him. Finally one of them caught up with him and the young editor was forced to shoot him. The troublemakers were stopped by this strong move and as the Grangers were with the editor, he managed to win his campaign.

McMahan depended mostly on editorial work to get a large circulation, finally going to a semi-weekly but as this was in advance of the town, so close to Salem and Portland, it was again made a weekly, with which it has remained.

February 1889 witnessed Woodburn's incorporation as a city. Jesse Settlemier was the first mayor and Amos Beach, father of the present City Recorder (George Beach) was the first marshall. The new marshall had to furnish his own six shooter but one of his friends turned out a "billy club" on his lathe and another had a brilliant six pointed star made, both of which are treasured by his son.

On the site of the first schoolhouse, there was erected in 1891 an eight room, hot air furnace heated educational plant. This was the former West Side School which served in its turn as a high school and later a grade school until the building of the new Lincoln Grade School seven years ago. The West Side School was considered in its day one of the most outstanding educational structures in the Willamette Valley and compared well with Salem school of the same date.

On October 23, 1890, the Bank of Woodburn was organized, incorporated and opened for business with a capital stock of \$40,000. A \$7,000. brick building was erected for its special use. On the corner of Front and Arthur Streets. This old building is still in use at the present time, but as the place of business of Mr. Peterson, who operates a shoe repair service. This was one of the soundest financial institutions in the state, passed successfully through the financial panic of 1893 without losing any of its depositors or making forced collections but was forced to dissolve during the Depression Eve of 1929. The officers of the bank were J.H. Settlemier, founder of the town, as president; J.M. Moyer vice president; and Colonel J.M. Poorman who, with his son Tracy, was to see active service in the Phillippines as cashier.

In 1892, R.H. Scott and his two sons Charles and Thomas erected one of the mextant landmarks of the town. This was the flouring mill for which they received \$3,000 as a bonus from the people of Woodburn. This building was a great milestone in the development of the town for it introduced electricity. Curious Woodburnites visited the mill at frequent intervals to see the incandescent lighting system while many hopes were entertained that the town would be lighted by this means.

By 1893, Woodburn boasted a population of about 1,500, 46 business houses, three hotels, two doctors, three lawyers, four churches, five church societies, a canning factory, a grain warehouse, a telephone system, ten nurseries, a machine foundry, three lumber yards, a roller

flouring mill, and a brick yard. Fraternal organizations consisted of Masonic Lodge, I.O.O.F., Knights of Pythias, A.O.U.W., G.A.R., W.R.C., Sons of Veterans, and Maccabees. The Independent had changed hands being sold to J.F. Day, a Presbyterian minister, and Mr. Auterson.

The first of several serious conflagrations visited Woodburn on the eve of Christmas 1893, destroying an entire block of business buildings between Grant and Hayes Streets. This was a tremendous blow to the little town, but its progress was retarded little. In fact this fire made known the necessity for brick buildings in the business district and the numerous brick structures which arose from the ashes of the destroyed block gave evidence that Woodburn men were not adverse to take heed of the dangers of fire.

About this time Woodburn was blessed with the unintentional building of an opera house. It is said that an enterprising gentleman began building a structure between Second and Harrison for the purpose of housing a well which was to supply the city with water. Water in sufficient quantities could not be found so the hole was covered over. Seats were arranged around the inside of the circular building and lo! Woodburn had an opera house.

On the eve of October 19, 1896, Woodburn was visited by the second serious conflagration in its history. This fire destroyed the entire business block between Garfield and Arthur Streets.

During 1899, this block was rebuilt and at present contains the Masonic Temple and one story brick structure built by Dr. W.L. Guiss, and S.I. Guiss. This same year saw the building of an \$8,000 electric plant and a \$3,500 Catholic Church was in process of being erected. The Independent, under Mr. Auterson who had acquired full ownership, was sold - first one half interest - then the other - to Herbert L. Gill, a journalist who had published newspapers in innumerable states of the nation.

In conclusion, let it be said that the town of Woodburn has had neither a great nor spectacular growth, but its genesis - even its naming - has closely followed the pattern of Willamette valley towns.

At present, there is a tendency for the town's business to move eastward toward the Pacific Highway, due undoubtedly to the fact that motor transportation is becoming more important than that of the railroad. At present, Woodburn possesses two excellent grade schools, one parochial school operated in conjunction with St. Luke's Catholic Parish, a fine standard high school, and numerous business structures. Her residential growth was somewhat retarded by the Depression, but due in some extent to the Dust Bowl Migrations during the early 30's, her population has almost reached the 3,000 mark.

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